

# GUIDE TO THE TULE ELK STATE NATURAL RESERVE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

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## TULE ELK STATE NATURAL RESERVE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

### PARK HISTORY

Tule Elk State Natural Reserve contains roughly 984 acres of natural, cultural, and historical resources. Located at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley in Kern County, the park sits directly adjacent to the California Aqueduct and Station and Tupman roads. The park is accessible by car via Station Road.

For thousands of years prior to the Spanish conquest, the area containing the present-day park served as home and hunting grounds for various indigenous groups, now collectively referred to as the Southern Valley Yokuts. Accessing multiple waterways, including the lower Kings, Kaweah, Kern, and Tule rivers, Tulare, Buena Vista, and Kern lakes, and numerous connecting sloughs, the indigenous people had established a large village called "*Tulamniu*" along the northwestern shore of Buena Vista Lake. The majority of the Southern Valley Yokuts were ultimately either removed from the land by Spanish missionaries or died off from the disease, overwork, or violence so prevalent in the Spanish mission system.

In 1868, cattle barons Henry Miller and Charles Lux partnered with entrepreneur James Crocker to purchase 80,000 acres of swampland in the lower San Joaquin Valley. Encompassing the present-day park, the land was ultimately converted to arable farm and range land. This process included draining the lakes and tule bogs as well as constructing a network of canals for water storage and transportation. Following these irrigation projects, the area produced a thriving agricultural industry.

In addition to developing regional agriculture, Miller also led the movement to save the endangered indigenous tule elk from extinction. Before the eighteenth century, the species numbered over half a million and ranged between Shasta County, the Tehachapi Mountains, the Sierra Nevada, and the Central Pacific Coast. After 1849, in addition to competing with other grazing animals introduced by European explorers, the tule elk were hunted in increasing numbers for their hide, tallow, and meat. By 1873, the tule elk were thought to be extinct, and a hunting ban was passed via legislation. However, upon discovering a few remaining tule elks on his property, Miller provided 600 acres of open range near the modern preserve. By 1895, the number had increased to 28, and by 1914, the herd had propagated to the point where Miller enlisted the California Fish and Game Commission to relocate the elk to a larger home.

In 1932, the State Park Commission purchased 953 acres near the town of Tupman for the purposes of establishing an elk sanctuary. The "Tupman Zoological Reserve" was run by the Division of Fish and Game and included 140 elk. Shortly after the reserve was purchased, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)—a New Deal work relief program—rehabilitated the grassland and marshy riparian habitat and built various adobe support buildings and structures (**Figures 1 and 2**). By 1954, California State Parks took over administering the property and the 41 surviving elk. The department initiated a feeding program as well as an artificial pond-construction effort. The park, originally called "Tule Elk Reserve State Park," was reclassified a state reserve

in 1963 and later reclassified again as a state natural reserve in 2004 via legislation. Today, the department maintains a herd of roughly 30-35 tule elk (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 1.** Restored riparian habitat, May 24, 1938. Catalog # 090-19105.



**Figure 2.** CCC-era adobe combination building, April 1936. Catalog # 090-19626.



**Figure 3.** Tule elk herd, October 26, 2010. Catalog # 090-P70930.

California State Parks preserves and interprets natural, cultural, and historical resources at Tule Elk State Natural Reserve. In addition to helping to preserve California's tule elk population—a task that the park unit shares with Carrizo Plain National Monument, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, the Wind Wolves Preserve, and the Cache Creek area of Lake County—Tule Elk State Natural Reserve also serves as home to other protected species, such as burrowing owls, Swainson's hawks, bobcats, western spadefoot toads, Buena Vista Lake shrews, side-blotched lizards, and tricolored blackbirds. The park also houses rare CCC-era adobe buildings as well as archaeological lithographic scatters. The park is day-use only.

## **Scope and Content**

The Tule Elk State Natural Reserve Photographic Collection spans the years circa 1932 through 2011, with the bulk of the collection covering the years 1955-1965, 1982-1987, and 2011. There is a total of 335 cataloged images, including 245 photographic prints, scans, and negatives, 72 35mm slides, and 18 born-digital images. Photographs originated primarily from California State Parks staff.

The bulk of the collection includes images depicting tule elk found within the park. Images include cows, bulls, and calves individually and in herds engaged in grazing and other activities. Additionally, a substantial portion of the collection documents herd-reduction efforts undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s; these images also include zoologists, photographers, and other park personnel.

The collection also documents the park's built and natural environment over the decades. CCC-era images include depictions of the adobe-built custodian's cottage, the blacksmith shop, combination buildings, the cobblestone bridge, and the swimming area. Later images document other park infrastructure, such as ramadas, picnic tables, the park entrance, roads, signage, and exhibit panels. Landscape and aerial views of the park, which feature sloughs, ponds, fields, and other vegetation, are also included.

While the Tule Elk State Natural Reserve Photographic Collection contains numerous images that feature the park unit's primary resource, the tule elk, the collection would benefit from more historic-era images. Conspicuously absent is any documentation of Henry Miller's initial preservation effort, and the CCC-era images are confined to buildings and structures.

### **Related Collections**

Department of Fish and Game Records, California State Archives.

Henry Miller Papers, California State University, Fresno: Special Collections Research Center.

Henry Miller Papers, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Miller & Lux Records, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Miller & Lux Records, UC Davis: Special Collections.

Photographs Selected from the Collections of the San Joaquin Valley Library System  
Member Libraries, San Joaquin Valley Library System.

Records of the Works Projects Administration, National Archives and Records  
Administration: Various Repositories.

Tule Elk State Natural Reserve Collection, California State Parks Archives.

### **Catalog Subject Search Terms**

Adobe

Aerial view

Bull

Calf/calves

Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

Cow

DPR employee(s)

Herd

Herd reduction

Landscape view

Shelter

Tule elk